

In April the reconstruction of Ramsay House was complete and the building was dedicated on April 14, 1956. A plaque was installed on the building as a memorial to Rebecca Ramsay Reese, a descendant of William Ramsay, and the prominent civic activist who had been instrumental in the early efforts to ensure the preservation of the building who had died the year before.<sup>50</sup> That second week in April 1956 was an extraordinary week for the Alexandria Association. Not only did the Association sponsor the dedication of the Ramsay House, Milton Grigg spoke about his restoration work at Monticello and Ramsay House at their regular meeting that week, conducted their annual Old Homes tour, and perhaps most importantly, that week in April marked the opening of the "Our Town: 1749-1865" exhibition at Gadsby's Tavern. "Our Town" is, arguably, the most important local exhibition that has ever been mounted of Alexandria consisting of portraits and works of art.<sup>51</sup>

A brochure published for the dedication ceremony glossed over the torturous road to completion and merely noted that "The Ramsay House miraculously escaped destruction by fire in 1942." The issue of the use of the building remained, however. The house was dedicated as the ceremonial offices of the Mayor with the vague goal of using it for activities "relating to preservation of historic records" of the City. The dedication brochure stated that the Alexandria Association would have its headquarters on the first floor. The Association has always been a volunteer effort and, as such, has not had the need for a "headquarters." The building never served as the headquarters for the Police Department or any other major city office. Since 1973 it has been the Alexandria Visitor's Center and the first impression that many form of Alexandria's historic buildings.

In 1983 Col. William Glasgow presented a paper entitled "Alexandria, A Leader of the Restoration Movement" to a seminar at the Northern Virginia Community College in which he presented an entirely different picture of how and why Ramsay House came to be restored. Col. Glasgow's presentation was quite personal and critical of virtually every aspect of historic preservation that took place in Alexandria from its beginnings in the 1930s. He characterized the preservation movement as the "destruction movement." In the paper he claimed

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<sup>50</sup> Actually two plaques were installed on the building. A bronze one on the King Street facade honoring Rebecca Ramsay Reese and a wood one under the porch at the entry way to the building. The bronze plaque states that William Ramsay was the first mayor of Alexandria. This is incorrect. Alexandria did not have an elected Mayor form of government until after a change in the Town Charter in 1780. William Ramsay had been named "Lord Mayor" of Alexandria, an honorary position, in the 1760s.

<sup>51</sup> "Progress Reported on Ramsay House Dedication Plans", AG, 2/1/1956, p.1; "To Honor Mrs. Reese, Ramsay House to be Dedicated, Saturday, April 14", AG, 3/6/1956, p.1; "Ramsay Job Architect to Give Lecture", AG, 4/5/1956, p.1; "Colorful Ceremonies Will Mark Ramsay House Dedication", AG, 4/14/1956, p.B-6; Brochure, "Dedication Ceremonies for The Ramsay House", Ramsay MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.



that all other accounts of the preservation movement in Alexandria were "false history" and "revisionist history" and that his account, based largely on the personal recollections of his friends, was made "to set the record straight." In Col. Glasgow's version of events surrounding the reconstruction of the Ramsay House the whole process was entirely controlled by Rebecca Ramsay Reese who made the restoration of the building her "thing", to use Col. Glasgow's phrase. In his version Mrs. Reese was upset because the building was being used as a brothel and she succeeded in closing it during World War II when there were not enough men around to protest the act. Glasgow's account notes that Mrs. Reese continued her "campaign" for many years until finally, "After War II, she finally was successful in overcoming the opposition of those who believed that if she wanted the damn place restored so much why didn't she just do it and live in it." According to his account, "Rebecca, however, continued to live in a fine old late Federal brick house at the northeast corner of St. Asaph and Cameron streets where she took in borders. [sic.]"<sup>52</sup> Col. Glasgow distorts the facts with respect to Rebecca Ramsay Reese. In about 1945 the Reeses moved to 219 South St. Asaph Street and she continued to live there until her death in 1955. Thus, for the entire period during which the restoration of Ramsay House was an issue Rebecca Reese did not live on Cameron Street as stated by Col. Glasgow. The Reeses did live at 517 Cameron Street from 1923 to 1945. Glasgow also ignored Mrs. Reese's many other contributions to historic preservation in Alexandria.

The issue of whether the house was ever moved from some other location to its present site is open to interpretation. Grigg's "Interim Report" of 1946 states: "Conclusive evidence exists in the present building to justify the categorical statement that the earliest portions of the building formerly existed on some other site and were moved to the present site either in 1748 or 1749..." Grigg footnoted this statement with the notation that this information existed in the "Architect's research file." Unfortunately such a file has never been located. He went on to say that the building had likely stood "in the Jones Point neighborhood, for perhaps a quarter of a century prior to the...establishment of the city." For this piece of information, Grigg cites in a footnote verbal statements by both a Mr. L.P. Robert and Mrs. Charles Beatty Moore.<sup>53</sup> When the preparations were begun for the dedication of the building the issue of whether the building had been moved from someplace else needed to be resolved so that the dedicatory

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<sup>52</sup> Col. William M. Glasgow, Jr., "Alexandria: A Leader of the Restoration Movement", presented at Northern Virginia Community College, October 15, 1983. Typescript copy at Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

<sup>53</sup> Milton L. Grigg, AIA, "Interim Report on Research: Ramsay House Restoration for the Alexandria Historical Society; Containing a Report and Recommendations for Selection of Period to Which the Building Should be Restored," Charlottesville, VA, June 1, 1946. Special Collections, Alexandria Library. Hereafter, Interim Report.



brochure could be clear on the subject. This was a subject of discussion at a meeting of the Ramsay House Committee on March 5, 1956. The Committee knew of Grigg's strong views. According to the minutes, in an attempt to resolve the issue, the Committee asked to meet with Kitty Reese, one of Mrs. Reese's daughters. She told the committee that "it was her mother's strong conviction that the house had been built where it now stands, and that the date was about 1724."<sup>54</sup> Mrs. Reese's views were equally as strong as Grigg's, and since the building was to be dedicated to her the Committee wanted to show proper deference. Given the conflicting stories about the origin of the house the dedication brochure was diplomatically silent about the issue.

Grigg's conclusion that the house was moved is not inconsistent with common building practices in eighteenth-century Alexandria. Smaller frame buildings were routinely moved from one location in the city to another. What is somewhat curious is his conclusion that the house had stood "in the Jones Point neighborhood". In the eighteenth century, Jones Point was essentially a tidal flat prone to continuous flooding and with little land area that would have been suitable for building. Nevertheless, it is likely one or two structures existed within the general Jones Point vicinity in the eighteenth century. What Grigg saw as the "Jones Point neighborhood" in the mid-twentieth century was the result of continuous fill operations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, beyond repeating local oral traditions regarding the origin of the house Grigg offers no convincing proof, either physical or documentary, in his report that the house was, in fact, moved. Grigg does note in the report that a number of building elements on the existing house had been re-used from some other eighteenth century building or buildings. Again, this was a common eighteenth building practice not only in Alexandria, but in most other Colonial settlements as well. Lumber was relatively scarce and expensive and recycling was certainly worth the labor involved.

Grigg's "restoration" decisions regarding Ramsay House were, it would appear today, arbitrary. The building he started out with and the building the city ended up with were very different. Indeed, by 1950 Grigg no longer claimed he could restore the building, but would rather "reconstruct" it. In October 1950 he wrote to the President of the Alexandria Association: "the Ramsay House is not proposed for restoration, since as stated before this is now impossible, but it is proposed to reconstruct a facimile [sic.] after demolishing the present building from the bottom of the foundations upwards and approximately eighty percent of the materials used will be new."<sup>55</sup> Thus, Grigg apparently felt he could transfer his

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<sup>54</sup> Minutes of the Ramsay House Committee, March 5, 1956. Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

<sup>55</sup> Grigg to Frederick W. Ford, October 11, 1950. Ramsay MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.



knowledge and experience from reconstructing eighteenth-century facsimiles in Colonial Williamsburg to a building in Alexandria. Not only were eighteenth-century Alexandria building traditions dissimilar to those at Williamsburg, building materials and forms were quite different. Ramsay House, today, resembles no other eighteenth-century building in Alexandria and with good reason, because it is not based upon Alexandria precedents. No other extant wood frame eighteenth-century building has a brick foundation. All use stone as the foundation material. None use oversize brick in English bond for foundation material. This type of foundation treatment is routinely used on virtually every reconstructed wood frame building at Colonial Williamsburg, however. The wood siding that Grigg used on Ramsay House is virtually identical to the beaded six inch exposure that is so common at Colonial Williamsburg. Research of eighteenth century wood siding in Alexandria indicates that it was commonly more than twice the width of the siding used at Colonial Williamsburg and did not display the uniformity found on the restored frame buildings there. Indeed, Grigg virtually acknowledged the differences when he re-used the wider Alexandria weatherboarding with an exposure of 12" to 13" for the siding on the east side of the building under the porch roof.

There are no extant central entrance wood frame eighteenth-century houses in Alexandria -- all are side hall plans. However, many of the reconstructed wood frame buildings at Colonial Williamsburg have a central entrance way and often center halls. The gambrel roof reconstructed by Grigg is extremely rare in Alexandria and is found on no other wood frame eighteenth-century structure, all of which have gable roof forms. However, there are several brick buildings with gambrel roofs dating from the late eighteenth century.<sup>56</sup> Measured drawings of the house done in 1936 by the Historic American Buildings Survey show the original gambrel roof form of the building by a dashed line. A central entrance gambrel roof form frame house, while without stylistic ties to Alexandria, is a familiar house form in Virginia's Tidewater area. This may argue somewhat for the theory of the building being re-located from another area further to the south.

Almost without exception eighteenth-century houses in Alexandria are oriented to the street with the entrance door generally opening onto the street. The Ramsay House entrance is off a courtyard. This seems particularly odd since William Ramsay was a retail merchant and he would have needed street frontage and access in order to conduct a successful business. A plausible argument can be constructed to suggest a center hall plan for the original period of construction with a doorway fronting the street and a secondary entrance fronting toward the river.

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<sup>56</sup> See, for example, 200 Prince Street (ca. 1780) and 106 South Lee Street (1793).



Grigg's 1946 "Interim Report" relies on findings and practices of the Williamsburg architects to determine the appropriate treatment of Ramsay House. Indeed, the report notes that both Singleton P. Moorehead and Walter Macomber, also members of the original Williamsburg architects as well as Fiske Kimball, then Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, advised Grigg on restoration plans for Ramsay House. Macomber, who had been Resident Architect at Williamsburg, came to Alexandria to conduct on-site inspections of Grigg's exploratory demolition of portions of the interior of the house in February and March of 1946.<sup>57</sup> Kimball, the first chair of the Department of Architecture at the University of Virginia, served as a member of the Advisory Board of Architects for the Williamsburg restoration project. While Ramsay House is a cultural icon in Alexandria, it is more representative of the early phase of the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg than of the building traditions of eighteenth-century Alexandria.

No record of a final report on the "restoration" of Ramsay House has been located. The original of the Interim Report and the original photographs are included in the collection of Grigg's papers at Alderman Library at the University of Virginia along with numerous other documents relating to his work on the building. The fact that no final version of a report on Ramsay House is included may indicate that one was never done.

The final form of the Ramsay House is also curiously similar to a gambrel roof house plan published in the November 1937 issue of *House and Garden*. That issue included articles about the architecture, furniture and gardens of the Williamsburg restoration as well as decorating advice on how to furnish a home with the Williamsburg touch. Importantly the issue contained plans for three houses designed by "the architects of the Restoration, Messrs. Perry, Shaw and Hepburn" which were described by the President of Colonial Williamsburg as having "true Williamsburg characteristics" and which "are the only plans for such houses approved by the Restoration."<sup>58</sup> The plans for "House I" are for a wood sided gambrel roof house with porch that bears a striking resemblance to Ramsay House. More striking, however, is a house designed by Grigg in 1936 in the Belle Haven section of Fairfax County. That house published in the June 1936 issue of *American Architect and Architecture*, is virtually identical to Ramsay House complete with gambrel roof, central entry, four section one story porch with wood columns, three dormer windows, and one interior and one exterior end brick

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<sup>57</sup> Interim Report

<sup>58</sup> Kenneth Chorley, "By Way of Introduction", House and Garden, November 1937, p.37.